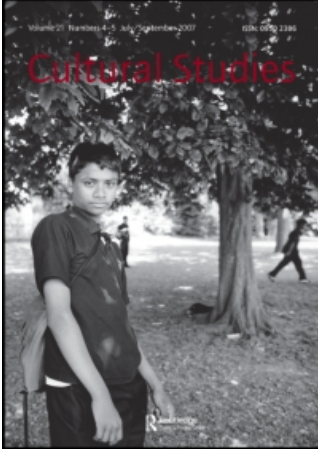


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Siu Leung Li

KUNG FU: NEGOTIATING NATIONALISM AND MODERNITY

Abstract

'Kung fu', as a cultural imaginary consecrated in Hong Kong cinema since the 1970s, was constituted in a flux of nationalism. This paper argues that the kung fu imaginary found in Hong Kong kung fu cinema is imbued with an underlying self-dismantling operation that denies its own effectiveness in modern life, and betrays an 'originary' moment of heterogeneity, an origin of itself as already 'impurely Chinese'. Having been British-colonized, westernized, capitalist-polluted and culturally hybrid, Hong Kong's relation with 'Chineseness' is at best an ambivalent one. This ambivalence embodies a critical significance of Hong Kong as a defusing hybrid other within a dominant centralizing Chinese ideology, which is itself showing signs of falling apart through complex changes imposed by global capital. Hong Kong's kung fu imaginary, which operates in a self-negating mode, is instructive when read as a tactic of intervention at the historical turn from colonial modernity to the city's reluctant return to the fatherland. The kung fu imaginary enacts a continuous unveiling of its own incoherence, and registers Hong Kong's anxious process of self-invention. If Hong Kong's colonial history makes the city a troublesome supplement, then the 'Hong Kong cultural imaginary' will always be latently subversive, taking to task delusive forms of 'unitary national imagination'.

Keywords

Colonial condition; cultural imagination; hybrid identity; liminal space; kung fu cinema; male body; nationalism; self-negation

Introduction

‘KUNG FU’, as a cultural imaginary consecrated in Hong Kong cinema since the 1970s, was constituted in a flux of nationalism during the historical process whereby China catches up with modernity. More specifically, it is a continuous and paradoxical cultural intervention useful for problematizing ‘traditional heritage’ in modern life. Partially, it constitutes the Hong Kong imaginary by negotiating the complex and conflicting experience of colonial modernity and postcoloniality.

In kung fu cinema, the restoration of a strong China and of national pride under colonial conditions is often effected through a fetishization of the male kung fu body imagined as an empowering fighting and self-defensive skill. The kung fu imaginary thus becomes a symbolic expression to reassert a Chinese subject in modern times. Yet paradoxically, it has a highly uneasy relation with modernization – if modernity is to be broadly understood as a break with tradition. Representing Chinese cultural essence, the kung fu imaginary is imbued with an underlying self-dismantling operation that denies its own effectiveness in modern life. This ambivalent filmic representation of kung fu as an always already self-negating imaginary problematizes the (re)claiming of a Chinese self and the problem of Hong Kong’s self-invention in a ‘home in perpetual transit’ (Chan, 1995: 22). It betrays an ‘originary’ moment of heterogeneity, an origin of itself as already impurely Chinese. How is ‘Chineseness’ historically imagined and unimagined by the British-colonized, westernized, capitalist-polluted, culturally-hybrid ‘Hong Kong’ in relation to its subject formation? Lee (1996: 266) suggests, ‘Hong Kong cannot contest any China’ because it is itself Chinese, yet ‘(c)ertainly, Hong Kong’s menace to Beijing stems from its cultural otherness’. It is in this ‘Hong Kong connection’ – kung fu cinema was largely ‘made in Hong Kong’ – that lies a critical significance of Hong Kong as a defusing hybrid other within the dominant centralizing Chinese ideology, which is itself showing signs of falling apart incited by complex changes imposed upon by global capital over the past two decades.

This paper attends to those kung fu films in which kung fu *per se* is represented as essentially a traditional Chinese martial art using primary hand-to-hand combat, regardless of the degree of authenticity or accuracy in its on-screen depiction. The concern of this paper is the representation of kung fu on film (i.e. kung fu as a discursive construction), not the real-life practice of martial art itself. Focus will be put on those films in which the re(claiming) of ‘Chineseness’

in the context of 'China/foreign' confrontation and negotiation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, is imagined through the (de)construction of the myth of kung fu. It should be noted that 'foreign' (*yang*) is not a simple monolithic entity. At the very least, a western-foreign (*xiyang*) of Euro-America and an eastern-foreign (*dongyang*) of Japan is often clearly marked in the Chinese national imagination.

The late Qing-early Republican period (*qingmo-minchu*), a time when China was in imminent danger of being carved up by western powers and post-Meiji Japan, is often seized by kung fu films to provide for them a homely temporal space. But they are not only limited to this historical setting. Some important kung fu movies are set in contemporary times. Bruce Lee's *The Way of the Dragon* (1972) (re-titled *Return of the Dragon* in the USA) is a case in point. It is the story of a country bumpkin from the rural backwater of cosmopolitan British-Hong Kong, who is utterly illiterate but equipped with formidable kung fu. He goes to Rome to rescue a female relative's Chinese restaurant from falling prey to a gang-related Italian businessman. Regardless of its contemporary setting, the film builds upon a deep structure of binary opposition: traditional China (intriguingly represented here by diasporic Chinese) versus the modernized west, just like most of the '*qingmo-minchu* kung fu films' do.

As the *qingmo-minchu* kung fu films gradually declined in the early 1980s, there emerged action films in contemporary settings that, for convenience sake, are sometimes labelled 'kung fu-action' or 'contemporary costume kung fu' films. These are often police and gangster dramas or Indiana Jones-type adventures packed with action choreography that demonstrates traces of kung fu. Most of these films (for instance Michelle Yeoh's *Yes, Madam* (1985), *Royal Warriors* (1986) and *Magnificent Warriors* (1987), Jackie Chan's recent hits from the *Police Story* series through *Mr Nice Guy* (1997) to *Rush Hour* (1998) (a Hollywood production), do not fall into the main focus of the present discussion, for their lack of immediately discernible Chinese martial arts as a local tradition, and their substituting more universal action sequences for national kung fu choreography. These films are distanced from the kung fu genre 'proper' and should be understood as a sub-genre that remotely feeds on yet delocalizes and transnationalizes 'kung fu'. They require a separate discussion beyond the scope of this paper.

Empty-hand fighting in liminal space: from martial to art

Although the filmic representation of Chinese martial arts dates back to the pre-war period, film critics generally agree that:

Authentic Chinese martial arts (*wushu*) were not represented on screen until as late as the 1950s, when the *Huang Fei-Hong* series began production

in the Cantonese film industry of Hong Kong. And it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that the martial arts came to be used as a powerful form of cinematic performance, again, principally in Hong Kong.

(Sek, 1980: 27–8)

Wong Fei Hung (Huang Feihong)¹ is a historical figure known in folk culture as a *qingmo-minchu* Cantonese kung fu master.² Almost ninety episodes of the ‘Wong Fei Hung’ film series, which feature the actor Kwan Tak Hing in the title role from 1949 to the 1980s, have become one of the major constitutive elements of Hong Kong popular culture. Although there has been a long history of kung fu in cinema, it was during the late 1960s to the late 1970s, the heyday of kung fu film, that it was firmly inscribed in the cultural imaginary. To a great extent, this cultural imaginary was constituted by, and constituting, popular nationalism.

The scene of Chinese kung fu fighters smashing Japanese karateists and western kick-boxers in empty-hand fighting has been a stereotypical cliché for years. The bulk of kung fu films in the 1970s and early 1980s belongs to the *qingmo-minchu* sort. The historical significance is that it is a period of transition from the demise of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) to the struggle for the formation of a modern nation, the Republic of China. Bruce Lee’s *Fists of Fury* (retitled *China Connection* in the USA) (1972), Jackie Chan’s *Drunken Master* (1978) and *Drunken Master 2* (1993), are all set in the early Republican period, while Tsui Hark’s radical reinvention of Wong Fei Hung in his six-installment saga *Once Upon a Time in China* (1991–1997) relocates the kung fu legend to the last tumultuous days of the imperial dynasty.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, although the broad socio-historical background was in general shifted to more ‘universal’ contemporary settings, it is symbolically significant and not a mere coincidence that the widely acknowledged first ‘kung fu film’, Jimmy Wang Yu’s *The Chinese Boxer* (1970), is set against the backdrop of the early Republican era. The significance lies in the fact that it is a story of Chinese kung fu (very specifically the ‘iron palm’ style) crushing Japanese karate, set in the historical juncture when Japanese imperial-militarists invaded the ‘sleeping giant’, which had just begun to come to terms with its shattered imperial past, and to articulate itself in modern terms while formulating its own nationalism.

Two points should be noted here. First, read in the context of European colonialism in its last phase, the cultural imagination about reviving China by Chinese living in British-Hong Kong has relied on the muscular and masculine³ body ‘accoutered’ with traditional Chinese kung fu. Jimmy Wang Yu’s ‘iron palm’ functions as a synecdoche of the invincible male Chinese body. This national imagination through kung fu (as part of a larger discourse of anti-colonialism) was in the beginning operating on gendered principles. It was already and has always been gendered as male.⁴ (This is not to say that kung fu heroines do not

exist. There have been numerous female kung fu stars of Chinese, Japanese, and western origins).⁵

The question of nation and subject building in the modern *and* colonial context is not straightforward. Jimmy Wang Yu, in fashioning his action-star image, was packaged as a skilled student of karate in real life – he demonstrated crushing tiles on television. Karate was the international *à la mode* martial art at that time. To live by colonial modernity in the 1970s, a Chinese might have to play karate but not the ‘Shaolin fist’; that is to say, to be nationalistic and anti-colonial, one’s imagination turned to kung fu. Living by this imaginary world was the simultaneous demarcation and collapsing of boundaries. No sooner had differences been discriminated than they were conflated.

Second, unlike swordplay films, the temporal setting of which naturally belongs to the ancient times when the fighting implements were the sword, hand-to-hand fighting kung fu films were in the beginning necessarily caught up in an ambiguously imagined time. Hand-to-hand fighting signals an in-between, heterogeneous, overlapping temporal space in which on the one hand, swords, weapons of the pre-industrial age, were already outdated and largely ineffectual, and on the other hand, firearms, the most efficient killing instruments in the age of modern science and technology, had to be employed sparingly only. While swordplay films verge on the realm of fantasy, kung fu films lean toward the realist mode⁶ (the cyber age Hollywood ‘kung fu’ fantasies of *Mortal Kombat* (1995), *Mortal Kombat 2: Annihilation* (1997), *Street Fighter* (1995) and *The Matrix* (1999) belong to a different category).

This is where the ambiguity of the representation of kung fu lies: it is only in some kind of liminal space in the continuous spectrum between these polarities – ancient/modern, fantasy/realism – that kung fu as a cultural imagination can possibly emerge, and that the heroic bodies can be given seemingly logical and justifiable situations to punch and kick, and thus to reassert the myth of kung fu. However, as Kwai-Cheung Lo points out, a commitment to Hong Kong requires attention to a cultural self-awareness of Hong Kong’s in-betweenness, its changing indeterminacy (Lo, 1996: 106). Seen in this light, the kung fu imaginary is always already self-negating. The popularity of the kung fu genre perhaps constantly implies the difficulty, if not impossibility, of the representation of kung fu. Modern technology has become the greatest obstacle to a legitimate display of kung fu, even in imaginative forms. Burdened by its own outmoded imperial legacy, China in the first half of the twentieth century did not seem to have produced any technological artifact that could be cherished as a sign of power for the Chinese people to build upon and imagine their national identity and pride. The Japanese have jujitsu, karate (the power of tradition), as well as their (in)famous war machines during World War II (the power of modernity), arguably consummated in the legendary fighter planes ‘Zero’. It is not difficult to see the reason that (Hong Kong-)Chinese people have fallen back predominantly upon the traditional martial art in their cultural imagination to reclaim (at

least physical) power and a local/national subjectivity in the modern world, for there has hardly been anything modern to cling on to.

It is such an irony that, according to an anecdote, the legendary kung fu master Huo Yuanjia (1857–1909) once said that martial arts were useless in the modern world:

(I) f I were born several hundreds years ago, wiping off bandits with spears and sabers, it would be a piece of cake for me to gain high offices. With today's advanced technology and firearms, what's the use of martial arts and heroic courage?

(Jin, 1969: 148)⁷

Huo always occupies a place in Chinese martial art writing. He has been dramatized in many kung fu films and television dramas, and is exactly the revered mentor of the imagined hero Chen Zhen played by Bruce Lee in *Fist of Fury*. This anecdote reveals that the anxiety of the uselessness of kung fu in the technomodern world already emerged at the point when modern technology came to China. This anxiety is often repressed in the fantasizing and mythicizing of the power of martial arts especially in the kung fu cinema. But it returns intermittently to haunt us: How is one to represent and to re-place kung fu in the modern world of technology?

In the anecdote, a friend of Huo's provides a simple and straightforward answer that is in tune with the nationalistic sentiments of the time. He consoles Huo:

It's not right (to think that martial arts are useless). Several hundred years back, all people took the skills of spears and sabers as powerful. You wouldn't be an eminent hero because too many would have the skills. Nowadays our country fellows are sick and weak, I hope that you'll make the most of your skills and spread them to turn sick men into heroes. It's your job.

(Jin, 1969: 148)

The narrator of the anecdote tells us that 'Huo was thus greatly enlightened and he gathered money to establish the Athletic Club of Essential Martial Arts (*jingwu tiyuhui*) in Shanghai to promote physical education' (Jin, 1969: 148).⁸ Therefore, Chinese martial arts can at least be useful as a means to strengthen the Chinese body, which is seen by many people (but not all) as a basis for the revival of the feeble country. Huo's friend betrays a contradiction: while trying to convince Huo that he is useful with his martial arts, he also implies and reinstates indirectly that Chinese martial arts are really dying and disappearing, since only a few people are practicing them now, not mentioning the contemporary practitioners' unskillfulness. The irony is that the value of Chinese martial arts and Huo lies in their rarity. And their rarity is a result of their not being in need

anymore in a techno-world, as Huo himself paradoxically points out. The fundamental contradiction between kung fu as a traditional fighting skill and the modern weaponry of firearms hangs there. The next question is: what modern space can kung fu effectively and legitimately claim for itself except in sport games, in the military as a supplementary and yet perhaps a shrinking part of training of soldiers, and to the few top martial artists as a lofty ideal of personal spiritual fulfillment and expression? Kung fu as a martial art is becoming more and more contra-modern at a time when even a kind of cyber-techno 'virtual war' has been envisioned. To situate itself in modernity, kung fu has to shift its emphasis from the martial (*wu*) to the art (*shu*).

The biggest embarrassment to the glorified kung fu representation in film is perhaps that firearms have existed and effectively been employed for at least 700 years, not mentioning that gunpowder was invented by the Chinese. When Oliver Cromwell in the mid-seventeenth century made good use of the power of rifles and cannons – as represented in the 1970 British film *Cromwell* – to fight for the redefinition of a nation ruled by the parliament elected by the people rather than submitting itself under King Charles' corrupt dictatorship, what were the Hong Kong people and filmmakers in the 1970s and 80s to do with 'empty-hand' kung fu in their imaginary quest for the anti-colonial national cause at a juncture when the British-Hong Kong Government began to introduce limited regional elections in the 'territory' (a term that had since replaced 'colony' in official colonial discourse)?

If kung fu films failed to reappropriate fragments of glamorous democratic history (something similar to that of *Cromwell*) for colonial Hong Kong in its narration of the imaginary homeland, a radical rereading of the kung fu genre can at least problematize conventional assumptions of monolithic identity, pure origin, and the myth of nation to counteract the reactionary official patriotic discourse in post-handover Hong Kong under the Tung Chee-hwa government. Kung fu films are not to be summarily swept aside as an ineffectual cultural imagination by ridiculing that the genre is all too incredible and easily subject to realist-rationalist dismissal; nor should it be simple-mindedly resolved by a complacent nationalist exultation of the genre as having symbolically redeemed the national pride of the Chinese people. The issue at stake is more complex than that.

The existential space for kung fu film has often to be invented through the formulation of arbitrary generic conventions (meaning that the spectator is not to ask the reason why) and the often crude design of plot to create specific situations for the dominant use of kung fu in fight scenes (meaning that the audience are rarely convinced). Imagine why the opium smuggler Han in Bruce Lee's American film *Enter the Dragon* (1973) totally forbids firearms on his private island? How come that Wong Fei Hung in *Once Upon a Time in China* has the skill and power to 'fire' a bullet using his thumb and middle finger to kill the American slave trader? And Tong Lung (Tang Long, literally 'Chinese dragon') in *The*

Way of the Dragon amazingly counters firearms by homemade bamboo darts! Martial arts tournament, as the most glorious and legitimate form of kung fu display in the modern world, is used from time to time as a structural device in kung fu films, with *Enter the Dragon* being paradigmatic. (It is not a coincidence that the whole concept of *Mortal Combat* is conceived upon a once-every-generation martial art tournament on a mystic island between the good and the evil, the mortal and the supernatural, the earth and the Outworld.)

Embedded in a 'twilight zone' between the abandonment of swords and the advance of guns, over and over the kung fu genre has to imagine for itself an existential space which has very weak mimetic basis. A paradox arises for the fact that the uniqueness of this genre simultaneously relies to a great extent on 'accurate and faithful' representations of the 'authentic' performance of kung fu itself on screen, and on the extent to which dangerous stunts in kung fu-action films are to be performed real with no cheating camera work. The order of mimesis and the controlling aura of the authentic are best seen in the works of director Kar Leung Lau (Liu Jialiang) and Jackie Chan. Lau, himself a kung fu player, has gained the special reputation of arguably the most faithful interpreter of kung fu on the silver screen, because of his utmost respect to kung fu as a great cultural tradition. Jackie Chan's own performing of all the daredevil stunts has become his trademark. Chan once said on American television (I give a verbatim transcription here to retain Chan's charismatic style):

When you watch Jackie Chan movie, no body can do it, very few people can do it. I do the stunts by myself. I think the audience come inside to see me is not the double. Twenty years sixty years later I can sit down to the theater in my home, I can tell the people: Hey, that's me. I don't think a lot of American actors, I don't think they sit down: 'Hey, that's me'. No, that's the double.

(Chan, *Good Morning America* 1993)⁹

Kung fu is caught in a dilemma of representation: the traditional and the modern, the mimetic and the non-mimetic modes of discourse are coexistent and co-extensive in the filmic imaginary, rendering it more relevant for cultural critics to attend to the incoherence, contradictions and instabilities of its meanings in circulation.

Kung fu films are not totally lacking in awareness of the impossible position of kung fu representations in the flux of modern reason. The very last moment of *The Way of the Dragon* is surprisingly self-reflexive, as film critic Cheng Yu (1984a, 1984b) has pointed out. In the last farewell scene, Tong Lung's friend (played by the comic actor Li Kun), as he sees Tong Lung walking away, gives the movie's last line: 'In this world of sabers and spears, the star of good luck has to be shining high on him wherever he goes'. The Chinese idiom *fu xing gao zhao* (literally 'luck-star-high-shine') is used here, implying that Tong Lung may be just

lucky. He is not invincible. Cheng Yu regards this as ‘the most human moment with the greatest self-awareness in Bruce Lee’s films’ (1984a: 22).¹⁰ Tsui Hark’s *Once Upon a Time in China* even self-dismantles its own kung fu myth by reiterating in a redemptively sober manner a stock scene that has been ridiculed in many parodies: i.e. the depiction of an indomitable Chinese kung fu fighter killed by western firearms. A variation of this motif of the fundamental ‘uselessness’ of kung fu in the modern world is represented in Jet Li’s *Fist of Legend* (1994; directed by Gordon Chan). The most respected Japanese martial artist Fumio Funakoshi¹¹ (Yasuaki Kurata) asks Chen Zhen (Jet Li) questions about martial arts before they begin their duel: ‘What is the most powerful combat skill?’ ‘What is the purpose of martial arts?’ Chen replies, ‘The most powerful combat skill is one that can strike down the enemy in the shortest time. Any skill that wins is the best skill.’ ‘The one and only one purpose of martial arts is to knock down the opponent.’ Funakoshi tells Chen that he is wrong, that the best way to beat your enemy is to use a gun, that the purpose of martial arts is to realize the physical potential of human beings to the greatest limit. This last point is in fact a reiteration of an idea of Bruce Lee’s about martial art. In *The Way of the Dragon*, Tong Lung explains to his waiter-friend, who knows no martial arts, that the essence of kung fu is ‘to express oneself with no limit to disregard schools and styles’. Bruce Lee also said elsewhere, ‘Ultimately martial art means honestly expressing yourself’ (*The Pierre Berton Show*). By emphasizing the art and playing down the martial, kung fu seems to have located a possible space within modern reason and logic by re-categorizing itself as an expression of the human body.

The ambivalence of the body and the name: Bruce Lee

Dissatisfied with western critics’ elevation of Bruce Lee to cult status my mythicizing his kung fu at the expense of the Asian people’s national concern, and arguing against an interpretation that buries Lee’s ‘nationalistic cause’ in ‘sub-Mishima psychology’ (Teo, 1992: 71)¹² and ‘narcissism, a code word for homosexual imagery’ (Teo, 1992: 79), film critic Stephen Teo reinterprets Lee for the Chinese people from a nationalistic stance:

In *The Way of the Dragon*, before his gladiatorial bout with Chuck Norris in the Roman Colosseum, Lee prepares himself, stretches his muscles, reaches down to his feet, and creaks all his joints. Here is a specimen of superb training, a fighter *all too humanly plausible – not the imagined warrior of an action movie director* (emphasis added). Lee’s appeal lies here. A Chinese audience who sees him knows that *Lee has done all Chinese proud* (emphasis added); they all know that his skill is *achievable* (original emphasis), a result of fitness and training and not a given. Lee is a common man hero.

(Teo, 1992: 70–1)

Teo reads him in terms of 'the cause of Chinese pride' (Teo, 1992: 71)¹³ and the potentiality of national self-fashioning through rigorous body training. He also emphasizes a 'right' reading of Lee's 'true' aspirations (Teo, 1992: 70, 79–80). Two intricately related points need to be addressed here. One is the emphasis on the 'realness' of the on-screen Lee in the figuration of a muscular body; the other is the question of nationalism as an interpretive strategy in cultural politics.

The coexistent and coextensive 'real' and 'less credible' in kung fu representation makes it a prerequisite on the part of the spectator to suspend rationality to a certain extent in order to conceive and receive the already suspended space of kung fu ('empty-hand fighting in liminal space') in the imaginative film world – it is a fictional space within a fictional space. To embrace and enjoy the pleasure of an imagined unitary national identity inscribed in the hero's body – a simultaneously 'all too humanly plausible' and an 'achievable' body – the spectator has to suspend his/her rationality to an extent far beyond the tolerance given to John Woo's not counting Chow Yun Fat's bullets. Suppressing intellect and the incredible in the kung fu genre and foregrounding emotion and the plausible, Teo's nationalist argument is built upon the validity of the 'real' of the kung fu hero on screen ('not the imagined warrior of an action movie director'). It is the attributes of the referent behind the representation – the body and identity of the 'real' Bruce Lee as powerful and 'Chinese' – that have intrinsic empowering values.

What is at stake is exactly how 'real', or how coherent and stable this sign and its referent can possibly be in the larger representational context which Lee as the subject has been constitutive of, and in which Lee as the object is being constituted in the discourse in a continual process – from his sudden impact on world cinema in 1970 beginning with *The Big Boss* and his dying young in 1973, to the recent American remake of his legendary career in the 1993 film *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* and his final elevation to the Hollywood Walk of Fame in the same year. The latest phase of Lee's re-essentialization as a sign of 'Chinese' and Hong Kong pride was concretized first in the formation of the long overdue Hong Kong Bruce Lee Club in 1995 which reinforced the popular construction of Lee as the transcendental signifier of 'Chinese kung fu', and consummated in 2000 with the four-week Bruce Lee film festival organized by the Hong Kong Film Archive ('The Immortal Bruce Lee: From the Kid to Kung Fu Dragon'), supplemented by a 'Hong Kong Dragon Expo 2000' organized by the Bruce Lee Union and Jun Fan Jeet Kune Do Hong Kong Chapter. Hong Kongers have finally embraced their own hero in full at the turn of the millennium. But Lee as 'a common man *hero*' (emphasis added), as Teo claims him, has meaning only in so far that the notion of 'hero' is understood as a cultural construction reproduced and reinvented in time. The ecstasy of ethno national pride for the Chinese as subalterns relies on the continual reproduction of a heroic myth built upon the subaltern spectators' simultaneous 'hallucination' – the 'seeing what is not there' – of the stability and coherence of the narration of nation, and 'reverse hallucination' – the 'not seeing what is there'¹⁴ – of the elusiveness and incoherence of the imagined nation.

The male kung fu body, which invokes a seemingly unitary Chinese national identity, has its history. The 1960s and 1970s in Hong Kong and Taiwan saw the rise of the so-called 'masculine-macho films' (*yanggang dianying*) (literally *yang* means 'masculine/brightness', the opposite of *yin*, the 'feminine/darkness'; *gang* means 'staunch'). This is mainly attributed to the influential action film director Zhang Che (Chang Che), active from the mid-1960s to the early 80s.¹⁵ He is renowned for his swordplay and kung fu films in which he must depict his romantic hero's tragic death in slow motion, always in the famous mode of *panchang dazhan*, a figuration taken from traditional Chinese opera. It is the convention of depicting the hero with a wounded torso bandaged up to prevent his bowels from spilling out while he slaughters the bad guys in his last moments. Zhang Che has been explicit about his extreme dissatisfaction with the effemination trend in Chinese cinema, as seen in the dominance of actresses, which was a phenomenon, according to him, quite the contrary to Hollywood where men always dominated. He has contributed to turning the tide since the late 1960s by systematically advocating masculine-macho films. His 'most important "contribution" ... remains the pioneering of a male oriented/dominated ideology in Hong Kong cinema' (Tian, 1984: 45). The sociocultural urge for the justification of promoting this violent male-dominated genre was to help re-cultivate masculine strength in the Chinese national character which was said to have become too feminine. In the Eurocentric-Orientalism schema, China was relegated to the subjugated female other. Puccini's operatic representation of the East is revealing: China is Princess Turandot and Japan is Chô-chô the Butterfly. In modern Chinese literature, China has been metaphorically represented as a mother raped thousands of times, or an impotent father, making his son also incapable of sex.¹⁶ Modern China was, to the disappointment of many Chinese people, not a masculine 'real' man. China's response to the challenge of the other has been to emulate the West, to be its equal, to become another 'West', to be and stand up like a 'man' against another man. When the West stereotyped its object of subjugation as female, the kung fu myth advocated, rather than dismantling the uneven hierarchy, the male/female binary and strove to reclaim China as male.

The obsessive display of the muscular male body has been a constant characteristic of Zhang Che's. Almost invariably, and often borders on absurdity, all of his heroes wear costumes exposing their muscular chests regardless of historical accuracy.¹⁷ The ultimate body powerful culminates in Bruce Lee's narcissistic display of his unrivaled naked upper body which is at once wedded with the body of the Chinese nation and 'redeems' the effeminate Chinese man.

Lee's kung fu films, specifically *Fist of Fury* and *The Way of the Dragon*, in many ways (re)produced a naive form of masculine nationalist discourse radiating from his spectacular body. He demonstrated his well-built muscular body indulgently on screen one-and-a-half decades before Sylvester Stallone's *First Blood Part II: Rambo* (1985). Flesh itself is not power; body-building is not an end in itself – it is the superb martial arts that give unsurpassed aura to the muscular body to

make it a spectacular body and a metaphor for 'the cause of Chinese pride'. While Stallone's Rambo body is empowered by the external addition of hi-tech modern weapons, Lee's body powerful is a result of the internalization of hand-to-hand combat skills of traditional martial arts. And kung fu itself as a Chinese tradition 'naturally' lends itself to the construction of *amour propre* and the invention of the Chinese nation. Stallone and Lee's bodies embody different ideologies respectively: Rambo's a construct of Reaganite cold-war rhetoric; Lee's an imagined collective identity against imperialism and colonization.

The nationalistic narrative of *Fist of Fury* and its mythic representation of kung fu are never coherent enough to underwrite the claim of the body powerful. For what the film tells us is that, after all, it is the semiotic act of un-naming that ultimately exorcises the national humiliation (if it has really been exorcised at all). That explains why many people regard these two scenes in the film classic: (1) Chen Zhen's forcing two Japanese fighters to literally eat the 'words' 'Sick Men of East Asia'; and (2) Chen Zhen's smashing of the wooden sign 'dogs and Chinese are prohibited' put up at the entrance of a park in Shanghai. Chen Zhen never really enters the park after all, and he is finally killed by a blaze of bullets (in a posture of the defiance of death that has become a classic moment in kung fu cinema). However, his death does not negate the nationalistic heroism, for Chen/Lee has presumably already un-named the sick Chinese man. One of the most 'memorable' and actually most-quoted lines (in both forms of parody and homage) from the film – from the mouth of Chen Zhen/Bruce Lee – 'You guys remember well, the people from the Jingwu School are not weaklings' (Mandarin version); 'You guys remember well, Chinese are not sick men' (Cantonese version). This line was transformed into 'I tell you, Chinese are not sick man of East Asia' in Donnie Yen's 1995 30 episode TV remake also entitled *Fist of Fury* (Star TV and Asia Television). In either case, the healthiness of the Chinese nation is an absence. It cannot be directly evoked into presence; instead, it has to be defined negatively, by what it is not: 'Chinese are not sick men of East Asia'. From Bruce Lee to Donnie Yen, the outcry of un-naming ('Chinese are not') necessarily and simultaneously re-names that which is to be exorcised ('sick men of East Asia'). A voice has been found, but it is not a voice of naming that strides toward a movement of possession;¹⁸ instead, it is a voice of un-naming that is paradoxically dispossessing and reinscribing the evil at the same time. Lee's outcry intensely and sensationally signifies the paradox of the ultimate exorcising power and sheer ineffectualness of the semiotic act of un-naming, which is presumed in the nationalistic narrative of the discursive field of 'Chen Zhen/Bruce Lee'.

In his self-scripted, self-directed *The Way of the Dragon*, Lee shows a most self-indulgent exhibition of his muscular body in two scenes: his early morning solo practice in the female relative's apartment and the scene of warm-up preparation before the duel with Chuck Norris in the Roman Colosseum. Norris' inordinately hairy and somewhat chubby body is in sharp contrast to Lee's sleek and

solid body. It is Lee, a Chinese using Chinese kung fu (as claimed by the film character Tong Lung), overcoming the ultimate alien other, Chuck Norris, an American (the western-foreign other) using Japanese karate (the eastern-foreign other). The film was made at a time when karate was the most popular and most representative of Asian martial arts, to both westerners and Asians alike. Lee's asserted 'Chineseness' is reinforced in his constantly wearing traditional Chinese clothes called *tangzhuang*, or nicknamed after the rise of kung fu film as 'kung fu dress', and his naming of his martial art skills as 'Chinese kung fu'.

Earlier on in the film, in the first combat between Tong Lung/Lee and a group of 'Italian' gangsters in the back alley of his relative's Chinese restaurant, Lee pronounces to those 'foreign devils' (*gweilo*) through a waiter-friend's translation that he is going to show them real Chinese kung fu. He then crushes them using only several seconds. To the common knowledge of many spectators, Lee used his unique blend of combat skill named by himself as 'Jeet Kune Do' (literally 'Tao of the intercepting fist'). The conflation of Jeet Kune Do with traditional Chinese kung fu intentionally by the filmmaker and willingly on the part of the audience is revealing. Lee's own practice of martial arts is highly syncretic. He synthesizes any skill functional and effective, regardless of cultural, national, sectarian boundaries, into his Jeet Kune Do. His practice is probably the example par excellence of cultural hybridity from the realm of martial arts – an attempt to cross boundaries and to resist one single dominant. However, by the blending-hybridizing-syncretizing of any fighting styles into one style – his style – Lee ironically developed a system of his own, with a definitive name. 'Jeet Kune Do' – the non-style becomes a style, the non-hegemonic turns into an iconic overwhelming model to be adored and imitated (although the quintessence of Jeet Kune Do is said to be its inimitability). In any case, Lee's own school of martial arts is apparently not authentically 'Chinese'. Lee was forever propounding his martial arts philosophy of breaking boundaries. 'Chineseness' as identity is represented by hybrid entities. In the fight scene mentioned above, Lee's tongue-in-cheek pompous demonstration of the preparatory posture of some traditional kung fu style before he strikes in his Jeet Kune Do serves only to mark the difference between his style and traditional kung fu. It is again naming that brings an identity ('Chinese' kung fu) into being, and ultimately accomplishes an act (the quest for national pride).

The complex identities in the (self-)representation of 'Bruce Lee' are further constituted in Lee's play on binaries. In *Fist of Fury* and *The Way of the Dragon*, he respectively plays a poorly educated (Chen Zhen) and a simply illiterate character (Tong Lung). In real life, he went to university and studied philosophy. He was articulate and explicit in his anti-Orientalist stance. He said on a talk show, 'I have already made up my mind that in the United States I think something about the oriental, I mean the true oriental, should be shown' (*The Pierre Berton Show*). But Lee's self-claimed 'Chinese national identity' and exploitation of nationalist sentiments are undercut and exposed by his own already multi-hyphenated and

slippery identity – ‘American-born-Chinese’, ‘Chinese-American’, ‘Hong Kong-Chinese’, etc.; and by his boundary-crossing journey. His short life sees a circular back and forth between the US and Hong Kong: born in the ‘old golden mountain’ (San Francisco), grew up in Hong Kong and went ‘back’ to the US in his late teens, and again to Hong Kong in search for a career breakthrough in the late 1960s. He died in Hong Kong and was buried for good ‘back’ in the US (Seattle) – the beginning and the end converge eventually at the same point, leaving behind only intangible traces of a full circle. But, it is, to use Lee’s own favourite metaphor, a ‘circle with no circumference’. The questions that haunt postcolonials are pressing here: Who is representing whom? On what grounds? On whose terms? By what right? For whom? What/who exactly is being represented?

In interrogating the masculine body and subject formation in Hong Kong, Kwai-Cheung Lo argues that Lee does not fall into the ‘Chinese hero’ category because of his diverse background and that the ‘Chineseness’ his filmic image invoked is a distant and void China. His films carry little trace of local Hong Kong culture. All in all Lee’s body fails to provide a solid ground to locate a specific Hong Kong identity and even pierces a ‘hole’ in the conventional signification of the icon (Lo, 1996: 110–1). This insightful reading opens up the interpretative space around Lee’s body, revealing the hollowness of Hong Kong identity to be ‘filled out’ by other bodies – animator Yuk Long Wong’s body images prove ‘the impossibility of a unified subject’ while Jackie Chan’s ‘reveals (the) ambiguity of being both local and international’ (Chan Lo, 1996: 116). Following this line of critique but taking a slight step back, it seems that Lee’s image somewhat pre-figures what is to come in Chan and others. What if we ‘ground’ Bruce Lee’s image back to the hole it punched out?

Bruce Lee, while constructing ‘Chineseness’ in the figure of his empowered muscular body on screen with sentimentally exploitative means, is simultaneously dismantling this icon. Lee’s heterogeneity in martial arts and hybrid identity, diasporic journey and metropolitan aura account for the special imaginary link between his figure and Hong Kong, a place colonized, marginalized, hybridized, and yet privileged by a modernity given rise in the ambivalent interaction with the colonizer and western culture. A casual remark by Lee’s wife further illustrates the role played by his figure in Hong Kong’s self-invention. In recounting Bruce Lee’s returning to Hong Kong from the US in 1970 and the fervent welcome given him by the local audience for his fame gained ironically through the ill-fated television series *The Green Hornet*, Linda Lee Cadwell said that Lee was like a ‘hometown boy made good’ (*Biography*: ‘Bruce Lee’, 1993). Lee’s myth lies not merely in his being a master fighter. More important, the cult hero is an ethnic (Chinese) with a touch of the metropolitan: he philosophizes, theorizes ‘Chinese kung fu’ in the language of Zen-Buddhism-Taoism, and perhaps more fluent in the empire’s language than in his native language. Bruce Lee and Chen Zhen fused into a discursive body that collapses the binaries of

literacy/illiteracy, modernity/tradition, and westernization/Chineseness. In retrospect, he was an 'intellectual' traversing the 'third world' and the metropolis. He was inter- and transnational. In the complex process of cultural b(l)ending in the (post)colonial context, a conventional Chinese hero would at once tinted pre-modern, while a local (Hong Kong) hero too provincial and unsophisticated. Lee's image begs to be read as a cosmopolitan postcolonial in the Hong Kong connection, a former 'hometown boy' who carries the aura of the empire's modernity.

Later remakes of the story of Chen Zhen often conflated Bruce Lee and Chen Zhen into their characterizations, resulting in further instability in their subject formation and national imagination. Jet Li's Chen Zhen in *Fist of Legend*, contrary to the poorly educated Chen Zhen created by Bruce Lee, is an overseas student in Japan, attending Kyoto University. But it is so ironic that at the beginning of the film he (accidentally) breaks a fountain pen – a symbol of western modern technology and the power of reading and writing – in the chaos of a victorious fight against Japanese bullies. The intellectual identity fades away gradually after the early part of the film.¹⁹ But Jet Li's characterization is still more complex than Bruce Lee's. Contrary to Lee's glorification of an unquestioned 'Chineseness' as against a constructed otherness, this time around Chen Zhen is depicted as explicitly borrowing the more effective and practical strikes and kicks from karate. He teaches his Chinese fellows the skills of the enemy's martial art. Embracing karate skills and having a Japanese girlfriend (Lee's Chen Zhen is committed to a Chinese woman and Lee himself married an American woman), Jet Li's Chen Zhen loves his country no less than Bruce Lee's, for he can distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' Japanese/foreigners. Blending part of the 'real' Bruce Lee into the characterization, the nationalistic and patriotic rhetoric is reproduced through co-opting instead of excluding heterogeneity. The anti-literacy gesture in the unstable imaginary figure derived from an intellectualism and pretentiousness inscribed in the representation of the persona. The inscription of these two interpenetrating and contradictory representations in one body conflating Bruce Lee/Chen Zhen/Tong Lung has en-gendered an ostensibly empowered, imaginary national body which is inherently an inconsistent signification.

Transfigurations of a kung fu master: Wong Fei Hung forever

At the time when Bruce Lee, as Chen Zhen and Tong Lung, was smashing and whamming his Japanese, Russian and American enemies in the utmost fury and bursting nationalistic anger and anguish, the conventional imagination of Wong Fei Hung in 'old Cantonese cinema' in Hong Kong, as an elderly patriarchal figure and folk hero in a self-contained local Chinese space²⁰ espousing Confucian

virtues of righteousness and filiality, was gradually displaced, transfigured and replaced. The climactic moment of transfiguration and rebirth of this Cantonese kung fu figure in a late transitional and (post)colonial Hong Kong context is seen in Tsui Hark's *Once Upon a Time in China*.

Wong Fei Hung is virtually the kung fu master in the history of Hong Kong films, apotheosized by an 'old Cantonese film' series that spanned from 1949–1970, with altogether some 80 episodes made (Yu, 1980: 80). The year 1970 has a symbolic significance in the present analysis: it signifies the beginning of an end. When the last episode of this 'old Cantonese' Wong Fei Hung series, entitled *Huang Feihong yongpo liehuozhen* (Wong Fei Hung courageously smashing the blazing battle formation), opened in August of the year, Jimmy Wang Yu's *The Chinese Boxer* – the first 'kung fu film' – was ready to release in December the same year,²¹ concluding the year's Hong Kong film output, inaugurating a new 'kung fu film' era, and wrapping up the age of old-fashioned conventional Cantonese *wuda pian* (literally 'martial-art-fighting film'), most aptly represented by the Cantonese Wong Fei Hung series. In the following year came Bruce Lee's *The Big Boss* which started a legend and changed the vicissitude of Hong Kong cinema. The year also sees the temporary demise of Cantonese films for about five years (Yip, 1982). Bruce Lee's three kung fu films made in Hong Kong were originally dubbed in Mandarin/Putonghua (see n10 above).

Among the major historical martial arts figures dramatized in kung fu films, Wong Fei Hung, a Cantonese martial artist, seems not to have caught much attention in the Chinese martial art world. His biographical accounts cannot usually be found in common Chinese martial art writings, while Huo Yuanjia, who was active in Tianjin and Shanghai, has often been given much recognition.²² It is instructive that Wong, at most occupying the marginalia of martial art histories, was reinvented a popular legend by Hong Kong filmmakers in the margins of mainland/stream Chinese culture. It is this marginality as subversion, as well as Wong's being a Cantonese from the southern margin of China, that make this figure an indispensable concern in Hong Kong cultural studies.

Interestingly enough, Wong Fei Hung was intended to be recreated as 'a modernized "Fong Sai Yuk" or "Hung Hei Koon"' (both kung fu heroes in Cantonese folk legends) and a 'modernized heroic figure', to 'save the crisis of *wuxia* film', as Wu Pang (Wu Peng), the original director of the Cantonese series who made a total of 59 episodes, states in his memoirs (Wu, 1995: 6). The controlling tropes here are modernization and salvation, a pandemic and stubborn obsession shaping the cultural imaginary of modern China. It is a historical coincidence that this urge to modernize an old genre was proposed at the moment (1949) when the birth of 'new China' was proclaimed and the distancing of colonial Hong Kong from its fatherland entered a long phase. The inception of the Wong Fei Hung myth in Hong Kong popular culture came out of an awareness of the centrality of modern values: rationality and realism. The major characteristic of this series is its reflexive attention to a realistic mode of representation of martial

arts emphasizing 'real combat'.²³ Ideologically, the series formulated a stable world of traditional Chinese community with its hierarchical Confucian values – benevolence and filiality are stressed (coincidentally vis-à-vis the sociopolitical upheavals and cultural uprooting in the mainland in the same period). If the series did accomplish its creator's task of saving the *wuxia* film at the turn of 1950 by appealing to rationality, realism, and traditional morality, it ended with the fall of the 'old Cantonese film' era in 1970 in failing to 'modernize' itself once again to catch up with the new technology of kung fu film and the shifting sensibilities of nationalism and colonial identity. To further examine this issue, let me turn to the actor who has been intriguingly conflated, will-nilly, with the filmic character in Hong Kong's imagination.

In the Cantonese 'Wong Fei Hung' series, the actor Kwan Tak Hing (Guan Dexing) (1906–1996), who was also skilled in kung fu, played the role of Wong throughout. He had virtually become Wong's reincarnation. After the disappearance of the 'old Cantonese series' in 1970, Kwan reappeared from 1974–1981 in four kung fu films playing the character of Wong, often occupying a supporting role in those plots.²⁴ It is reported that altogether Kwan played Wong Fei Hung in 87 films, and this is noted in the 1994 Guinness Book of Records.²⁵ Although Jackie Chan plays the young Wong Fei Hung in his 1978 comic-kung fu classic *Drunken Master* and the sequel of 1993, and Jet Li in the first three and the last (also the sixth) of Tsui Hark's *Once Upon a Time in China* saga, Kwan remains in the imagination of most Hong Kong people the one and only 'real' Wong Fei Hung.

Kwan was trained in Cantonese opera in the warrior role-type (*wusheng*) and famous for playing righteous heroes on stage. He has been revered a 'patriotic artist' (*aiguo yiren*) for his resistance against the Japanese invaders during the Second World War and known for his contribution to charity work throughout his life. While Kwan's interpretation of the character of Wong as an embodiment of traditional Chinese values and Confucian morality has been firmly inscribed in the local imagination, and he himself being so patriotic and nationalistic a person, he was nevertheless honored an MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire) in 1981 by Queen Elizabeth II. He delightfully accepted. The account here is by no means intended to be disrespectful in any way to Kwan; instead, it is taken as an instance pointing to the ironic and paradoxical colonial condition of Hong Kong. It is a further illustration of what Stephen Ching-Kiu Chan called 'a unique form of displaced Hong Kong identity' that has made it possible for Hong Kong people back in the 1950s to 'freely identify themselves, no so much *with* the colonial government per se ... as *within* the social imaginary determined consensually by tacit popular acceptance of the existing regime of power' (original emphasis) (Chan, 1995: 24). In such a sociopolitical condition overdetermined by 'the Chinese cultural hegemony' and the 'existing British colonial rule' – the 'two antagonistic machineries of identity production historically instituted in our social imaginary', Hong Kong people can collectively and

individually desire ‘intermittently to become, alternately, “Chinese” and “non-Chinese”’ (Chan, 1995: 23). In this logic, not only could Kwan (and many other Hong Kong people) live as nationalistic Chinese while accepting OBEs, MBEs, CBEs, JPs, etc., but the Cantonese film world of Wong Fei Hung that Wu Pang and Kwan created in a British colony, set presumably in the last days of the Qing period when historically China was dreadfully threatened by western modernity, can also be represented as safely free of foreign threats. The imaginary of Kwan/Wong is essentially Chinese, self-sufficient, and complacently feeding on its traditional values. Following the supposedly anti-colonial cinematic convention of that time which is contradictory to realism – the Qing people were depicted without a ‘pig-tail’ – the Wong Fei Hung series manifests and floats in a suspended world of dislocated time frames collapsing the late Qing and the early Republican periods. Possibly a sign of Hong Kong’s weak historical consciousness, the series fails to situate itself in historical time and dodges from issues of modernity and modernization with no scruples. Wu Pang’s ‘modernized Wong Fei Hung’ is to be understood in a very limited sense. ‘Nationalism’ in the enclosed world of the Cantonese Wong Fei Hung series is represented in its promotion and preservation of traditional Chinese morality. In any case, the cozy, homely world where good always prevails over evil, and with only quarrels among Chinese country fellows, has to betray signs of disruption, of the irrepressible confrontation between the self (Chinese, colonized subject) and the other (foreign, colonizer).

In one of the later episodes of the series, the stable ‘Chinese’ kung fu world of the self is intruded by the alien other, as manifested by the threatening presence of a karateist, who is cheated into evil conspiracy against Wong by the arch villain – variations of this character-type in different episodes have always been played by the famous actor Shek Kin (Shi Jian) who plays Han in *Enter the Dragon*.²⁶ In this 1968 film entitled *Huang Feihong quanwang zhengba* (Huang Feihong: the boxing championship duel), the karateist challenges Wong with Japanese combat skills, and is defeated by Wong’s kung fu. He is also taught a moral lesson in traditional Confucian virtues of benevolence, righteousness, tolerance and forgiveness. It is a classic formulaic structure that Wong Fei Hung (Kwan Tak Hing) almost always gives the arch villain (usually Shek Kin) a chance to repent.

But our reading can hardly end with this simple, traditional formula. There is a further confusion of identity in the characterization of the ‘alien’ karateist. Although he dresses unmistakably in Japanese costume and his major entrances are punctuated by traditional Japanese music, he is verbally identified by Wong’s students as a northern-Chinese. Shoddiness in filmmaking might be the immediate reason for such an ‘error’. Nevertheless, the karateist conflates two others in one body. He is a double-other: an other in terms of regional differences of the north-south divide within China, and a non-Chinese other in terms of his foreign combat style.²⁷

The traditional imagination of the kung fu world in the 1960s could not possibly turn a complete deaf ear to the encroaching march of the other cultures and values from the 'outside', especially when Hong Kong's economic take-off and subject formation gradually took a significant turn in the same decade (Turner, 1995). Wong Fei Hung did respond and attempt 'successfully' in his own world to contain the alien threats by reaffirming and reinforcing the traditional tool and its value – kung fu. But a newly invented vengeance-is-mine type of kung fu hero as exemplarily represented by Chen Zhen and Tong Lung has mostly displaced the traditional tolerance and forgiveness with their furious 'o-cha' punches and kicks. It is in Tsui Hark's *Once Upon a Time in China* – made after the traumatic experience of the 4 June bloody crackdown of the pro-democracy movement in Beijing 1989 and when Hong Kong entered the last years of its handover transition – that the provincial imagination of this traditional kung fu figure and the one-dimensional anti-foreign fury of the Chen Zhen-type were ruptured, diffused and reconfigured in a more complex and imminent condition of (post)coloniality and decolonization. Wong Fei Hung was reinvented once more as a national hero but perplexed by the infusion of modernity into this rapidly changing reality of demising tradition and semi-coloniality. While Bruce Lee's Chen Zhen loses his 'father' (his kung fu mentor Huo Yuanjia), Tong Lung's father is an absence (he only talks about his uncle in Hong Kong), and Kwan Tak Hing/Wong Fei Hung is a 'father', Tsui Hark's Wong Fei Hong has a father but is not one himself. In the 1990s' imagination, he was a man in the process of becoming a father, resituated in an extremely unstable historical moment of China's first modern revolution; a symbolic figure repositioned in a disruptive site of struggle and negotiation intersecting Hong Kong, China and the colonial other as Hong Kong was coming to terms with the return to the fatherland. Was the illegitimate child (the Crown Colony of Hong Kong) not the guilt of an effeminate father (China)?

The circulation of heroic masculinity inherited from the tradition of kung fu films, especially Bruce Lee's wrath and Zhang Che's masculine-macho, takes on a different turn in *Once Upon a Time in China*. Tsui Hark incarnates into the male hero's body the possibilities and potentials of China's yet-to-be-accomplished self-strengthening, putting into question and at once reproducing a masculine nationalist project to confront western encroachment in the rethinking of modern Chinese history. The masculine is recast in Wong as a more pensive hero, with a more intellectual style. The muscular is relocated in the unnamed bodies of Wong's legion of muscular students, who, in their bare torsos, are depicted in a breathtaking ultra-wide shot in the opening credit sequence as practicing kung fu in great spirit and discipline gilded in the early rays of the red sun on a vast beach seemingly stretching to the limit of heaven and earth. In the grand nationalist discourse, China has always aspired to be a strong man.

The theme song of the film borrows its melody from a traditional Cantonese tune *jiangjunling*, which had already been used successfully for decades by the

original Wong Fei Hung series as its 'signature tune'. In fact 'jiangjunling', 'Kwan Tak Hing', and 'Wong Fei Hung' have in the cultural imagination of Hong Kong people become a 'trinity', each of them evokes one and the same 'entity'. The theme song of *Once Upon a Time in China* is entitled 'Men Should Self-Strengthen' (Nan'er dang ziqiang) with a set of sentimental yet uplifting new lyrics. This song title also became the original Chinese title for the first sequel, known only as *Once Upon a Time in China 2* in English, which Tsui Hark once said on a radio talk show in 1996²⁸ was his own most favourite work so far. Apart from its explicit masculinist stance, the interesting circular logic of the lyrics is that the purpose of self-strengthening is to become a great man (*fenfa ziqiang zuo haohan*) and that since men are men they should self-strengthen (*jishi nan'er dang ziqiang*). Therefore, masculinity and the national cause were already (con)fused as one. In addition to the political-allegorical dimension of the *Once Upon a Time* saga as the filmmaker's critique of being Chinese today, its theme song which boosts masculinity in a nationalist undertone has become more politically charged when democratic supporters in Hong Kong began using it annually in rallies protesting the 'June 4 crackdown'. With another set of new lyrics, which are undoubtedly solemn, moving, and dramatic but equally masculinist and nationalist, the song is re-titled 'Memorial to the Great Men' (*Ji haohan*) by the 'Hong Kong Alliance in Support of the Patriotic Democratic Movement in China'. Throughout the entire lyrics, only the male pronoun 'great men' (*haohan*) is used to stand for those who were killed during the 'June 4 crackdown' in Beijing. This elegy was most powerfully heard at the demonstration rally for the release of the Chinese political dissident Wei Jingsheng in December 1995 when the Beijing Government once again unjustly sentenced Wei to another 14 years. The song was also sung in the June 4 1999 candlelight vigil held at Victoria Park, around 70,000 Hong Kong people gathered,²⁹ 10 years after the suppression.

Political crises in the modern Chinese context seem to be invariably associated with the national cause. The national imagination is obsessively en-gendered through the reclaiming of masculinity even beyond the filmic world of kung fu. Commenting on Hong Kong people's use of the 'Wong Fei Hung' tune in the June 4 memorial rallies, Xu Jiatuan, former head of the Hong Kong Xinhua News Agency who fled to the USA after the 1989 crackdown, once said that 'this psychological state of using the song to speak out really makes one uncertain whether to mourn or to laugh' (*zhezong jiede fahui di xintai, zhen shiren tixiao-jiefei*). Negotiating between mainland China's hegemony and Britain's colonization, this kind of twisted strategies of political expression – resetting a commercial-sensational-nationalistic song to protest against the fatherland's hegemony – is perhaps the most poignant statement of the compressive absurdity of the transitional and (post)colonial condition of Hong Kong. Adding to this already bitter irony is that this twisted means of expression was validated under the 'patronage' of the colonizer before the handover.

Compared to Bruce Lee's myth of kung fu and nationalistic sentiments, Tsui

Hark's heroes are inherently incoherent figures, perplexed by the problem of ethnicity, identity, and cultural self-positioning in unsettling historical moments. Tsui Hark's Wong Fei Hung no longer adheres to or upholds Confucian moral values. He is at a loss in this traumatic transition, losing grip of the traditional values yet not knowing how to adapt to new times. At the same time when the film and its sequels cling on to a masculinist notion of equating men with national strengthening, destabilizing elements are brought into the narrative by Wong's Aunt Thirteenth, a 'westernized' yet 'Chinese' woman who returns home from England. Switching between Victorian dresses and Chinese costumes, Aunt Thirteenth, the feminine, embodying uncertainties and represented as an agent of Europeanized modernization, enchants Wong and drives him to rethink China's situation and its future. This seemingly simple-minded subordinate female character embodies subtle nuances in relation to the film's nationalist discourse.³⁰ Yet the feminine here is also co-opted into the modern project of progress. When Aunt Thirteenth offers to make a western suite for Wong, he asks, 'Aunt Thirteenth, are foreign countries really that great? Why ... do we have to emulate others?' The very same 'fact' is (again!) reiterated; she explains, 'They invented the steam engine and many other things. Their science is more advanced than ours. If we don't learn, we'll be left behind.' The eternal game of catching up with the West seems to be, paradoxically, a necessity in the nationalist project on non-West peoples. While Bruce Lee ostensibly sets up oppositions between China and the West, the oppressed and the oppressor, the good and the bad, Tsui Hark resorts to a naive synthesis of the East and the West. In *Once Upon a Time in China 2*, the scene of Wong Fei Hung the Chinese herb doctor and the British-trained medical doctor Sun Yat-sen, each using his own medical practice to help the victims in the besieged British embassy, epitomizes the director's idealistic solution to China's catch-up in the uneven game of power in modern history.

A kung fu film by genre, *Once Upon a Time in China* has its unsettling aspects in that it dismantles the kung fu myth that it represents to en-gender the fantasy of a strong and masculine nation. By reiterating that the male Chinese body, however profusely imbued with fabulous Chinese kung fu, is no match for western firearms, this dynamic film seems to be falling back to a hackneyed device. Yet it is exactly at a moment of cliché that rupture is produced. In the film, Yan Zhendong (literally 'vitalizing the East'), a good-natured northerner who has achieved the legendary skill of 'the iron cloth' (meaning that no weapon can penetrate his 'body of steel') is wandering in the southern province of Guangdong, jobless and excluded by southerners as an alien other. The character's status of being subaltern within a subaltern people constitutes a tragic tension that informs the film's reflection on the Chinese national questions. Reminiscent of the older Wong Fei Hung films, he is lured by the local scoundrels to fight against Wong. But Wong the kung fu master does not overcome him this time; the villainous Americans with rifles kill him. His 'body of steel' is perforated like a beehive in a climactic slow motion sequence. Of course the

depiction of a seemingly indomitable Chinese kung fu fighter killed effortlessly by gunshots has for a long time been a farcical cliché. It appeared cynically on Hong Kong television gag shows at the height of the kung fu heat in the 1970s and is analogously repeated in Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) in which Indiana Jones in the most inappropriately smug expression shoots dead an Arab swordsman who brandishes his weapon in the most dizzying way. The significance of the reenactment of this motif in *Once Upon a Time in China* is its unexpected serious-mindedness in reiterating a cliché. Yan utters these last words to Wong: 'No matter how great our kung fu is, it is no match for western guns'. It is a dominant characteristic of Tsui Hark to make direct thematic statements in his films which are often to the degree of embarrassment, if not insult, to the audience. That the scene in question is so excessively self-expository and highly self-dismantling has in effect greatly redeemed its preaching stance. This soberly and self-reflexively treated figure in relation to the film's reflection on the predicament of China's self-replacement in face of its own cultural degeneration and western imperialism puts it in another category as a sharp contrast to the arrogant and Orientalist travesty in *Raiders*.

Kung Fu: the 'legend' continues . . .

Jet Li's *Fist of Legend*, an update of Bruce Lee's *Fist of Fury* after 22 years, symbolically acts to reinstate the kung fu legend invoked in the bodies of Huo Yuanjia, Wong Fei Hung, Bruce Lee and Chen Zhen. It conjures the ultimate legend that the Chinese 'spirit of the martial' (*shangwu jingshen*) is indestructible. It is implied that this spiritual quality gives rise to the eternal strength of China as a nation. The arch Japanese villain in the film, General Fujita, states that although Japan has defeated China in military terms, the final conquest of the Chinese people depends on the destruction of this legend. Thus Huo Yuanjia the kung fu icon has to be annihilated by all means. Fujita shares 'wisdom' with General Crassus (Laurence Olivier) in *Spartacus* (1960): 'However, this campaign is not alone to kill Spartacus. It's to kill the legend of Spartacus.' The essence of history making and self-invention seems to rest ultimately in the realm of the discursive and the imaginary. The numerous military defeats of China since 1841 were a signification of its failure on the road to modernity, and accounted for 'Hong Kong' becoming Hong Kong the British Crown Colony. The legend – something that has no 'real' existence – is to symbolically redeem China from this historical disgrace. Bruce Lee's kung fu 'fury' is mythicized to a kung fu 'legend' in late-colonial/transitional Hong Kong with an optimistic twist (Jet Li's Chen Zhen survives and joins the resistance against Japanese militarism). Yet the films' self-reflexivity renders it a self-dismantling fantasy of its own legend of indestructibility.

The filmic representation of kung fu often envisions a contest between

tradition and modernity with a self-denial of modernity caught in a liminal temporal space imagined somewhere in modern history. Jackie Chan and other action stars' transformation of the kung fu genre into action films set against international contemporary backdrops sees the disappearance of 'kung fu' and the emergence of a more universal action choreography that disseminates transnationally. One can at best call it 'kung fu-action'. The trajectory of success of these 'kung fu-action' stars ironically parallels the continuous unveiling of the incoherence of the kung fu imaginary which registers Hong Kong's anxious process of self-invention. The unitary national imagination evoked through the kung fu body only dissembles the impossibility of its own imagination, which seems to be an ineluctable Hong Kong condition. If Hong Kong's colonial history makes the city a troublesome supplement, then the Hong Kong cultural imaginary will always be latently subversive, taking to task delusive forms of unitary national imagination. The latest round of this radical impossibility is manifested in the flux of the desire for internationality in the discursive performance ranging from the Hong Kong SAR Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa's 1999 Policy Address imagining a 'world-class city' to post-handover big-budget action films aspiring to transnational and global dimensions, e.g. *Who Am I?* (1998), *Hot War* (1998), *Extreme Crisis* (1999), *Gen-X Cops* (1999), *Purple Storm* (1999), *Tokyo Raiders* (2000), *AD 2000* (2000), *Time and Tide* (2000), *Skyline Cruisers* (2000), *Gen-Y Cops* (2000). These films, largely in the footsteps of Hollywood in terms of their scope of perceptions and CG effects, are more often than not imbued with unique Hong Kong 'kung-fu action'. All in all, they are performative acts emerged in the midst of Hong Kong's sudden, intense, post-97 realization of the encroachment of 'time and tide' – to allude to Tsui Hark's film of the same title – that Hong Kong is in the process of turning into 'another Chinese city'. The time of the kung fu genre ended coincidentally in the year 1997 with *Once Upon a Time in China and America*, the sixth and last installment of Tsui's Wong Fei Hung saga (produced by Tsui himself and directed by Sammo Hung).³¹ If Hong Kong cinema still has the power to explain Hong Kong culture as it had before 1997, it seems that it does not dwell much in the kung fu genre discussed in this paper. For now, the tide has turned to a new 'transnational action' genre exemplified by the films mentioned above. These transnational action films, some of which are very much 'kung fu-action' à la *The Matrix*, can be seen as a further transformation of the contemporary 'kung fu-action' genre that points to a more cosmopolitan Hong Kong culture. We will have to wait and see the next return of the kung fu legend in Hong Kong cinema.

Notes

- 1 I shall give both the Hong Kong-style Cantonese transliteration and the mainland Chinese pinyin system for names and titles with Cantonese origin, with

the pinying appearing in square brackets in the first appearance of the term. All other romanizations are in pinyin except for those personalities who have been commonly known in their English names or other spellings.

- 2 Wong Fei Hung, according to Yu Mo-Wan, was born in 1847 and died in 1924 (1980: 79). Ho Ng offers slightly different dates: circa 1855–1920 (1993: 147). Zeng (1989: 135) gives the same dates as Ng's.
- 3 Yvonne Tasker coined the notion 'musculinity' to refer to the action heroines in film and to signify a combination of 'muscularity' and 'masculinity' on the female body: 'That is, some of the qualities associated with masculinity are written over the muscular female body. "Musculinity" indicates the way in which the signifiers of strength are not limited to male characters' (1993: 149).
- 4 Related comments can be found in Sek (1980), Rayns (1980, 1984), Cheng (1984a, 1984b).
- 5 American martial artist Cynthia Rothrock is probably the best known Caucasian woman in kung fu cinema. Recently Malaysian-Hong Kong-Chinese Michelle Yeoh (aka. Michelle Khan) has come into the international spotlight, starring in the Bond film *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1998) and Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (2000).
- 6 Sze Man-hung briefly discusses the relation between *qingmo-minchu* background and the realism of kung fu films (1995: 281–2).
- 7 The author Jin Enzhong was a martial artist and military man during the Republican era. His own preface dates September 1933. All translations from Chinese are mine.
- 8 The school was set up in 1910, according to Matsuda (1984: 264). The original Japanese version of Matsuda's book was published in Tokyo in 1979. Today, the Jingwu School has branches in various Asian cities, including Hong Kong and Singapore.
- 9 Chan talked to Joe Segal in an interview on *Good Morning America* (Feb. 24, 1993).
- 10 Cheng Yu also points out that this last line in the original Putonghua voice track was later changed in the Cantonese track to: 'Tong Lung deserves people's respect wherever he goes' (1984a: 22). For many years in Hong Kong, only the Cantonese version of *The Way of the Dragon* was available on videotape and on video laser disc. In 1996, the film was released on VCD (video CD) by Mei Ah Laser Disc Co. with both Putonghua and Cantonese voice tracks. DVD versions of all Lee's kung fu films were released in late 1998, with two to three voice tracks and a selection of subtitles in eight or nine languages.
- 11 The naming of the character as 'Funakoshi' is obviously a deliberate choice, since the 'father' of karate is called Gichi Funakoshi. Coincidentally, he was a contemporary of Huo Yuajia. But when Funakoshi began to spread his karate in Japan in around 1909, Huo was already poisoned to death by a Japanese doctor in Shanghai.

- 12 A different version of this article appears as the chapter 'Bruce Lee: Narcissus and the Little Dragon' in Teo (1997).
- 13 The western critic in question here is obviously Tony Rayns (op. cit.). Teo in this article does not quote Rayns directly, but he names him in his 'Bruce Lee' chapter in *Hong Kong Cinema* (1997: 113).
- 14 Talking about the cultural space of Hong Kong, Ackbar Abbas, borrowing from Freud, writes, 'It is as if both locals and expatriates were suffering for a long time from what Freud called "reverse hallucination". As hallucination means seeing what is not there, so reverse hallucination means not seeing what is there' (1993: 2).
- 15 See Zhang for his personal accounts of his conception and practice of *yanggang dianying* (1989: 51–66).
- 16 See the poems of Yü Kuang-chung (Yu Guangzhong), 'Qiaoda yue' (Percussion music) and 'Dang wo si shi (When I'm dying). See also Yu Dafu's 1921 novel *Chenlun* (Sinking).
- 17 Zhang did not regard this shoddiness as important at all. See his response to his critics (Zhang, 1989: 54–7).
- 18 Susan Bassnett quotes Carlos Fuentes's notion of 'movement of possession' in her discussion of the naming of postcolonial reality in magical realism (1993: 89–90).
- 19 It is an unfortunate incidence that this film led to a case of 'macho violence'. The incident was on the headlines of many Hong Kong newspapers on 15 August 1995. The night before, a man was wounded outside a video rental shop by a gunshot fired by an off-duty policeman. There was a brawl between the two men who struggled to snatch the newly released laser video disc of *Fist of the Legend*. For details, see *Ming Pao* (15 Aug. 1995: A3).
- 20 Referring to 'older Cantonese movies', Ackbar Abbas states that 'the local was an ethos of exclusion: it defined a narrow homogeneous social space where foreigners and foreign elements had no place, which is what gives these old movies, when we watch them now, a certain campy quality' (1994: 69). Abbas is here generalizing all 'older Cantonese movies'. It should be noted that it is not infrequent that those Hong Kong people depicted in Cantonese films of the 1950s and 1960s have overseas connections and movements, although mainly with diasporic Chinese communities in south-east Asian locations like Singapore and Malaysia. Some plots of those 'old Cantonese films' are 'tales of two cities' which take place between Hong Kong and overseas locations. There are others that are set in Japan and New York Chinatown. For more information, see *Overseas Chinese Figures in Cinema* (1992).
- 21 Dates based on *Filmography of Chinese Martial Arts Films* (1980).
- 22 The biographies of Huo and his son Huo Dong'ge (1895–1956) are featured in Matsuda (1984), Yang (1986: 224–5) and Li *et al.* (1987: 224–5). Huo Yuanjia's biography in Jin is one of the longest in this book (1969: 142–9). All four works give no biographies of Wong Fei Hung. It is interesting to note that

- Wong's student Lam Sai Wing (Lin Shirong), but not Wong himself, has a brief biography in *Zhonghua wushu cidian*. In a historical work solely devoted to Cantonese martial artists, Wong has a five-line account while Lam's biography occupies one full page (Zeng, 1989: 135–7). The scarcity of extant written information about Wong may account for this last incident.
- 23 On the cover of the souvenir book of the first Wong Fei Hung film entitled *Huang Feihong zhuan* (The true story of Wong Fei Hung) (1949), we read these phrases following the names of the actors: '*quanbu yingqiao yingma / quanbu zhenjun yanchu*' – meaning 'it's all hard-hitting / it's all actual fighting'. An image of this cover can be found as an inset in *City Entertainment*, 450 (11 July 1996): 16.
 - 24 For a filmography of Kwan Tak Hing, see *City Entertainment*, 450 (11 July 1996): 16.
 - 25 Adding together the 13-episode Wong Fei Hung television series that Kwan made in 1976 for Television Broadcasts Co. Ltd. (TVB), there are a total of 100 episodes of Kwan's 'Wong Fei Hung' acting career (Chan, 1996: 14).
 - 26 Rayns has an interesting observation on the final duel in this film in which Shek Kin fights Bruce Lee: 'The fight scene between the two actors, however awkwardly filmed, closes a circle in Chinese cinema lore, linking the conservative traditions of *wuxia pian* of the 1950s with the world-conquering ambitions of the *wuxia pian* of the 1970s. In these terms, the outcome of the fight (the death of the villain) is much less important than the fact that the fight takes place at all' (1984: 29). The '*wuxia*' used by Rayn should more accurately be read as 'kung fu'.
 - 27 The actor playing this ambiguous character is in real life a northerner. In Bruce Lee's *Fist of Fury* he plays a truly Japanese character who is killed by a plummeting samurai sword pierced through his body in a fight against Chen Zhen.
 - 28 In an edition of the talk show *Chengren zhiji* (Adult buddies) on Commercial Radio 1, 11:30 pm to 1:30 am, hosted by filmmaker Manfred Wong.
 - 29 According to the organizer, the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of the Patriotic Democratic Movement in China.
 - 30 Borrowing from Heidegger's concept of *technè*, Kwai-Cheung Lo sees Aunt Thirteenth as 'the embodiment of a dazzling kind of knowledge (which I would like to term *technè* . . .) that keeps presenting and opening itself to Huang and soliciting him to respond in kind' and reads 'their relationship as a possible correlation between man and technology . . . what Aunt Thirteenth represents is the affable, feminine aspect of this threatening technology, which is ultimately accepted along with love, whereas the aggressive, masculine side of technology, represented by the western imperialists and slave traders, has to be expelled and "overcome"' (1993: 83–4).
 - 31 As the film title suggests, Wong Fei Hung's adventure this time takes place in the American 'wild wild west'. Jackie Chan's latest Hollywood venture *Shanghai Noon* (2000) follows this structure of 'journey to the West', embedding Chinese kung fu in the American western. Chan's hero has no difficulties dodging bullets from the cowboys and undergoes an initiation: the realization

that he is a slave of repressive tradition Chinese values and that emancipation is brought about by Euro-American ideas of freedom. The underlying Orientalism and the editing-oriented action sequence have disappointed a few critics as well as fans back home.

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